

# EDWARD IRVING AND ANNAN

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## I

IN the last decade of the eighteenth century Annan was a quiet place, with a population which did not exceed a thousand. It was unattractive in appearance, consisting, as it did, almost entirely of dull little houses with thatched roofs. A new and commodious church had been built in 1789, but as yet it had no steeple. The seventeenth-century Town Hall, where in 1745 the Magistrates and Council met daily to drink confusion to Bonnie Prince Charlie at the expense of the Burgh,<sup>1</sup> was neither quaint nor beautiful. Most of the burgesses enjoyed what the Shorter Catechism calls "a competent portion of the good things of this life," but none of them possessed wealth. The shadows crept—they did not sweep—over the sundial built into the front wall of the Buck Inn; and men had leisure to read the Bible and Patrick Walker's *Lives of Peden and Cargill*, and to listen to scraps of those ancient ballads which form so vital a part of our Border literature. Mrs Oliphant asserts that religion was not an active force in Annan at the close of the eighteenth century. It is true that there was no feverish activity in religious circles at that time. But the good old custom of family worship was maintained, and every Sabbath morning grave-looking men and women, carrying well-thumbed Bibles and little sprigs of southernwood, crowded to the Parish Church. There was much genuine, if unobtrusive, piety in Annan when our modern Saint Edward first knelt in prayer at his mother's knee.

Edward Irving was born on 4th August 1792, in a plain two-storeyed house in Butts Street, near the old Fish Cross of the Burgh—not the "Town Cross," as stated by Mrs Oliphant. The building is extant, and is now marked by a tablet of red granite with an inscription. During a visit to Annan in his old age, Carlyle was one day seen standing with his great mournful eyes fixed on the house where the "best man" he had ever, "after trial enough, found in this world" was cradled.<sup>2</sup>

Irving's father, Gavin Irving, was a tanner carrying on his trade in a

<sup>1</sup> Minutes of Annan Town Council. Some of the bills of the publicans remained unpaid till 1749.

<sup>2</sup> "Death of Edward Irving," *Fraser's Magazine*, No. 61.

yard which was in constant use till about forty years ago, when the tanning of leather ceased to be one of the industries of Annan. According to the late Rev. James Dodds of Dunbar, a gifted minister of the Free Church of Scotland, who was distantly related to Edward Irving and was the husband of Carlyle's "Bonny little Barbara Duncan," Gavin Irving, like himself, was a remote scion of the ancient Border family of Irving of Bonshaw.<sup>1</sup> Possibly Edward did not relish the idea of such a descent, for James Irving, the representative of the Bonshaw family in the "killing time," was prominent among the persecuting lairds, thus bringing down upon his house the curse of Donald Cargill—a curse which has now been removed.<sup>2</sup>

Though Gavin Irving may have had in his veins the blood of Border chiefs he was by no means a romantic figure. Carlyle describes him as "a prudent, honest-hearted, rational person, with no pretension to superior gifts of mind." Dodds says that he was "like a douce Davie Deans, or an elder of the kirk in her primitive days." David Moncrieff Ferguson, who was born at Annan in 1796, and who for a considerable time conducted a small school in the town, asserts that Gavin was "illiterate"; but no doubt the innocent dominie considered every one illiterate who did not understand the classical allusions which abounded in his conversation. Gavin was long a member of Annan Town Council, and many of the old minutes in the books of the Corporation bear his signature, as well as that of his brother, Councillor Edward Irving. He was a bailie when the election celebrated in Burns's ditty, "There were five Carlins in the South," took place.

The mother of Edward—Mary Lowther—was a native of Dornock, a parish of Annandale, where her father owned some land.<sup>3</sup> She was a great-granddaughter of the Rev. Thomas Howy, minister of the parish of Annan from 1703 to 1753, and a niece of Dr Bryce Johnston of Holywood, author of several theological works. She had brilliant black eyes, and, unlike her "easy-going" husband, she was gifted with no small mental and physical energy.

The graves of Gavin Irving and his wife in the ancient churchyard of Annan, near the "drumly" river of the balladists, are marked by a headstone with this inscription:—

"To the memory of Gavin Irving, late Bailie of Annan, who died 17th July, 1832, aged 74 years. Justly esteemed. And Mary Lowther,

<sup>1</sup> "About Edward Irving," *Leisure Hour*, Sept. 28, 1872.

<sup>2</sup> The House of Bonshaw was not cursed for all time, but, as the writer was informed by the late Colonel Irving of Bonshaw, for two hundred years.

<sup>3</sup> A table stone in Dornock Churchyard commemorates Mrs Irving's ancestor William Lowther (*d.* 1728), the founder of the Annandale branch of a family which gave its name to the village of Lowthertown in the parish of Dornock.

his Spouse, who died 9th July, 1840, aged 76 years, also much esteemed. . . . And the Rev. Edward Irving, M.A., a most zealous and faithful minister of the Gospel in London, who died at Glasgow on the 7th of December 1835, aged 42 years.”<sup>1</sup>

The Bailie had three sons and six daughters.<sup>2</sup> His eldest son, John Lowther, and his youngest, George, both became doctors, and both died in early manhood. The eldest daughter, Janet, who, according to Carlyle, was very like Edward in appearance, married Provost Robert Dickson, a brother of Dr Thomas Dickson, the African traveller. Another daughter, Agnes, married Warrand Carlile, the well-known West Indian missionary, and was the mother of Gavin Carlile, or Carlyle, who edited a collection of Irving’s writings.

## II

Edward was duly baptised by the Rev. William Hardie Moncrieff, minister of Annan since 1783, in the Parish Church, where the vessel used on the occasion is carefully preserved. He received his first school-lessons from an old woman named Peggy Paine. Jones, in his *Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Edward Irving* (1835), says: “It was reported that she was aunt to Thomas Paine . . . and it was also said that she had been his first instructor in the rudiments of reading.”<sup>3</sup> As the author of *The Age of Reason* was born in Norfolk as far back as 1737, it does not seem likely that his aunt and first teacher was the same Miss Paine, or Payne, who lived at Annan at the close of the century.

When Edward had learned to read he was removed from Peggy’s care and sent to a small private school conducted by Adam Hope, the dominie thus graphically sketched in Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*: “A strong-built, bony, but lean kind of man, of brown complexion, and a pair of the sharpest, not the sweetest, black eyes. Walked in a lounging, stooping figure; in the street broad-brimmed and in clean frugal rustic clothes; in his schoolroom bareheaded, hands usually crossed over back, and with his effective leather strap (‘*cal*,’ as he called it, not ‘*tawse*,’ for it was not slit at all) hanging ready over his thumb if requisite anywhere.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Irving died in 1834, not in 1835, as stated on the tombstone.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the daughters died in infancy.

<sup>3</sup> This statement was repeated by Washington Wilks in his biography of Irving, published in 1854. Mrs Oliphant was content to say that Peggy was “a relation of the unfortunate tailor-sceptic.”

<sup>4</sup> *Reminiscences by Thomas Carlyle*, I, 75, 76.

Hope was a staunch Burgher Seceder.<sup>1</sup> He was Session Clerk of the Burgher Church at Annan during the ministry of William Glen, afterwards famous as a Persian scholar. Prior to 1807, the Seceders in the town and immediate neighbourhood had no church of their own, and every Sunday Hope and other devout men walked to Ecclefechan—a distance of about six miles—to worship in the meeting-house there. Irving often joined the small band of pilgrims; and the impression made on his mind by the earnest words of the Rev. John Johnstone, the village pastor, who was a good scholar and a man of the highest Christian character, was never effaced.<sup>2</sup> Johnstone's church, which is now converted into a tenement of dwelling-houses, was thus described by his son, the Rev. John Johnstone, in an address delivered at Ecclefechan in 1860: "It was indeed quite in the barn style: it had no ceiling, and the roof was thatched. In process of time the house was raised in height, and galleries were added, but curious looking boxes those galleries were."<sup>3</sup> A building so poor would be despised nowadays, even in remote districts; but to Carlyle and Irving the little temple was full of "sacred lambencies, tongues of authentic flame from heaven."

In 1804 Irving became a pupil at Annan Academy, an excellent school which had come into existence through an endowment set apart when a vast common in the neighbourhood of the town was divided among the burgesses. The Rev. William Dalgliesh, a fine scholar, was Rector of the Academy, and Hope, who had given up his own school, was English master. Irving was related to Dalgliesh. In an inscription on the fly-leaf of a presentation copy of one of his books he referred to his connection with the Rector:

"To the Rev. Wm. Dalgliesh, in recognition of the ties of consanguinity, to which have lately been added those of affinity, this volume is respectfully presented by his former pupil, the Author—Edward Irving."

Irving's sister, Janet, had married Robert Dickson, brother to Dalgliesh's second wife.

<sup>1</sup> He was the second son of a farmer in the parish of Gretna, and was born in 1756. Leaving home at the age of 18, he became a travelling draper in Lancashire. This occupation did not suit him, and having resolved to study for the Church he went to Aberdeen University in 1779. At the end of the fourth session he left College, and devoted himself to "schoolmastering." After teaching in various seminaries in the North of England, he came to Annan, where he remained till his death in 1823.

<sup>2</sup> Irving was always ready to own his indebtedness to the saintly Ecclefechan minister. In *Homilies on the Sacraments*, a work written long after Johnstone's death, he says, "I am old enough to remember my father's granting his barn, as being one of the largest in the town, to a most holy father of the Burgher communion to whom I owe a debt of gratitude which I delight ever to acknowledge."

<sup>3</sup> *The Annan Observer*, Jan. 19, 1860.

Mrs Oliphant's account of Irving's school-life is incomplete and inaccurate. She refers to Peggy Paine's little school and to the Academy, but does not mention the private school at which the main portion of his early education was received. Irving was nearly twelve years of age before the Academy was opened, and he attended it for about a year only. Mrs Oliphant does not mention Dalglish, and seems to have thought that Hope was head-master.

Irving was not remarkable for diligence at school; but, as Dominie Ferguson informs us, "He could dispense with the quantum of assiduity indispensable to success in minds of ordinary dimensions. . . . He would need merely to read over a lesson to understand it in all its bearings."<sup>1</sup> He was fonder of open-air exercises than of study, and in various sports he acted as the natural leader of the boys of the town, giving instructions to his companions in a tone of authority.

### III

The first stage of Irving's life ended in 1805, when he went to Edinburgh to complete his education at the University. In the intervals of his training he always came back to the affectionate circle in Butts Street, and the writer is informed by the great-granddaughter of General Dirom of Mount Annan, that during one vacation at least he acted as tutor to some members of the General's family.<sup>2</sup> In 1810 Irving became a teacher at Haddington, and in 1812 he removed to Kirkcaldy, where he became engaged to Isabella Martin—afterwards his wife. While at Kirkcaldy he studied for the ministry as an "irregular student."<sup>3</sup> In 1819, having been licensed to preach, he was appointed assistant to Dr Chalmers in Glasgow. His famous ministry in London commenced in 1822. At first he was marvellously successful, but in the later years he had bitter experience of outward failure. On April 26, 1832, he was ejected from his church in Regent Square by the Presbytery of London, and on March 13, 1833, was convicted of heresy concerning the Human Nature of Christ, and formally deposed by the Presbytery of Annan, the

<sup>1</sup> "Reminiscences of Edward Irving," in *The New Moon, or Crichton Royal Institution Literary Register*, 1864, vol. xx. Ferguson was long an inmate of the Crichton Asylum. A sketch of his life will be found in the writer's *Poets of Dumfriesshire*, Glasgow, 1910.

<sup>2</sup> She has seen receipts by Irving, and also receipts by Carlyle, for fees received from General Dirom. In 1814 Carlyle was entrusted with the tuition of two of Dirom's sons.

<sup>3</sup> "That is to say, giving attendance a certain number of weeks annually for six years, instead of four complete winters, this accommodation being made in favour of those students for the Church who occupy settled situations at a distance from the college."—*Chambers's Biog. Dict.*, s.v. Edward Irving.

Court which had ordained him.<sup>1</sup> In the dark hour of his final rejection by the Church of Scotland, Irving had the warm sympathy of the people of Annan. So deep was the popular feeling in his favour that, at the close of a sermon which he preached on 14th March in a field near Annan Church, now occupied by a terrace, he was surrounded by hundreds of men and women eager to shake hands with him, or even, as one who was present declares, to touch his garments.

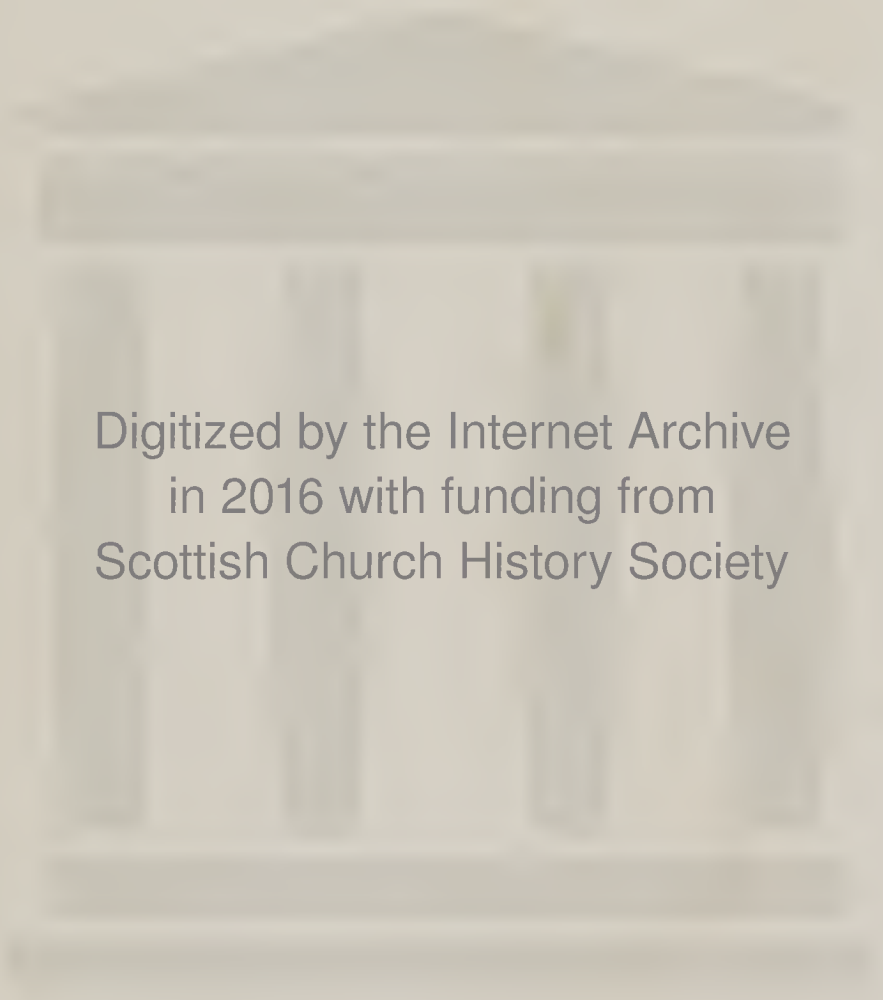
Irving's great humiliation was soon followed by his death. Worn out by labour and sorrow, he passed away on 7th December 1834, saying, "If I die, I die unto the Lord. Amen." The Cathedral crypt in which he sleeps is a fit resting-place for one who had the heart of a medieval saint.

In Annan, at least, the fame of Edward Irving has not grown dim. His countless treatises are seldom read,<sup>2</sup> but his name is revered as that of the most remarkable man the town has produced, and interest in his meteoric career is almost as keen as ever. His statue by J. W. Dods, Dumfries, now stands in the broad High Street. It was unveiled on 4th August 1892, the centenary of his birth, by Dr Charteris, then Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, in the presence of a vast crowd, which included Edward Irving's niece, Miss Janet Dickson, and not a few persons who had been privileged to hear him preach.

The statue has given universal satisfaction. A few years after its erection the writer spent an evening with Irving's son, the late Professor Martin Howy Irving, and he was glad to find that, in the opinion of the Professor, the statue afforded a perfect likeness of his father. Perhaps, as one of the speakers at the unveiling ceremony remarked, it is significant that the first statue upon which the stranger, advancing from the South, looks at in Scotland, "is one erected to the memory, not of a prince, or a nobleman, or a statesman, or a poet, or a soldier, but of a simple Christian minister, who, with distinguished gifts, and prophetic voice, and chastened spirit, and amid trying scenes, was enabled to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ."

<sup>1</sup> For a full account of Irving's trial at Annan, see *Trial of Mr Edward Irving*, Dumfries, 1833, printed at the *Journal Office*.

<sup>2</sup> For a list of Irving's books and pamphlets, see the writer's *Bibliography of the Parish of Annan*, Dumfries, 1925.—Eds.



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